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SUBJECT: SAG ON HAMAS, PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS, AND IRAQI DEBT

REF: A. SECSTATE 037552
B. SECSTATE 043406

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Don Teitelbaum. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The SAG is likely to continue to engage Hamas, including a visit by Intelligence Minister Kasrils and Deputy Foreign Minister Pahad to the Middle East region next week and a visit by Hamas leadership to South Africa at an undetermined date. DFA Chief Director for the Middle East Marx insisted that South Africa will publicly press Hamas to comply with Quartet conditions and will not allow itself to be "used" by Hamas. Presidential Legal Advisor Mojanku Gumbi reiterated that position during a March 27 meeting, noting that Hamas "owes its current position to previous agreements, including the Oslo accords," and that it "must accept the other elements of previous agreements" such as nonviolence, Israel's right to exist, and the RoadMap. Hamas cannot "pick and choose." The SAG's actions reflect its ideological support for dialogue and engagement rather than isolation in virtually all circumstances. The Israelis share our concerns, but so far have stopped short of refusing to meet a South African delegation. Marx also noted that the SAG holds substantial Iraqi debt and pledged to check on the status of possible debt relief. He doubted the SAG would open a mission in Iraq until security improved. End Summary.

HAMAS

¶12. (C) CDA met with SAG DFA Chief Director for the Middle East Ambassador Johann Marx on March 22, to discuss recent press reports that Hamas officials might visit South Africa, drawing on Ref A points. DFA Director of The Levant and PolCounselor also attended. CDA strongly urged the SAG to hold off on contacts with Hamas until Hamas accepts quartet conditions. CDA noted that the SAG and Palestinians have exchanged diplomatic missions, so messages can be sent effectively without high profile visits. CDA also stressed that Hamas would use a high level visit to acquire legitimacy, noting that Hamas, leak of the discussion of the South Africa visit had almost certainly been just for that reason.

¶13. (C) Marx stated that the SAG understands the quartet conditions, and has accepted Hamas' request to visit South Africa at some future date within this framework. The SAG's goal, he insisted, is not to insert itself in the negotiating process, but to facilitate the climate for negotiations and encourage Hamas to recognize a two-state solution, disavow violence, and accept the international Road Map agreement between Israel and the PLO ("which neither party has implemented"). In the SAG view, neither the SAG nor any other outside country except the U.S. can influence direct negotiations "since Israel only trusts the U.S.," stated Marx. He recounted SAG "SPIER Initiative" efforts between 2002 and 2004 to bring Palestinians and Israelis together for dialogue in South Africa. The objective has been to share South Africa's experience of bridging hardline positions of

former apartheid leaders and the ANC via negotiation, dialogue and the ballot. He said we all pressed the Palestinians to be democratic under the Oslo Accords and now must live with the outcome of free and fair democratic elections.

¶4. (C) Marx stressed that South Africa would not allow itself to be misrepresented, and would be public in its insistence on key principles such as acceptance of Israel's right to exist and nonviolence. He stated "they will come and the SAG will continue to engage them in any event, and they will ultimately accept the conditions, even if they do not immediately say so publicly." He noted a Newsweek report that 68% of Hamas supporters and 86% of all Palestinians support negotiation with Israel. Marx affirmed that "the SAG will not be out of step with the UN."

¶5. (C) To discuss how to move the process forward, Marx disclosed that Intelligence Minister Kasrils and Deputy ForMin Pahad plan to visit Israel, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians within the next few weeks, following state visits to South Africa by PLO President Abbas and the King of Jordan. (NOTE: Press reports indicate that the Pahad/Kasrils visit could be as early as next week. END NOTE) Marx said that on Pahad's instructions he was to relaying this information to the CDA and requested that it be kept confidential until all the countries involved were informed of SAG plans.

¶6. (C) Charge followed up this discussion on March 27 with Presidential Legal Advisor Mojanku Gumbi, again pressing Ref A points. Gumbi reiterated the SAG position outlined by Marx. In particular, she emphasized that Hamas "owes its current position to previous agreements, including the Oslo accords," and that it "must accept the other elements of previous agreements" such as nonviolence, Israel's right to exist, and the Road Map. Hamas cannot "pick and choose." CDA repeatedly stressed that Hamas would attempt to manipulate meetings with the SAG for its own purposes and that high level contact risks hardening the Hamas position.

ISRAELI CONCERNS

¶7. (C) Backed by his Deputy Ilan Fluss, Israeli Ambassador Ilan Baruch told CDA on March 27 that the DFA had informed him only the week before of SAG plans to visit Israel, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and the PLO and to invite Hamas to South Africa. (NOTE: He also said that someone in the Jewish community here already had informed him of these initiatives in December 2005. End note.) Ambassador Baruch said the DFA had asked whether Israel maintained the policy from the Arafat period of not receiving any official delegation that met with the PLO. He said he had no instructions from Tel Aviv on the last point but thought it best not to give an explicit answer at this time. Baruch noted his personal opinion that the SAG risked alienating Israel and the U.S. by pursuing its present course, and that the timing was complicated by elections and likely coalition building after the elections. Ambassador Baruch said wanted "some practical way" of changing the SAG's plan, stopping the "lunacy" of a Hamas visit to South Africa and the proposed April 6-10 SAG visit to the MidEast. CDA noted that he had initiated a meeting recently with the DFA to reiterate the USG and quartet's position in dealing with Hamas. CDA welcomed further coordination on the issue.

¶8. (C) Ambassador Baruch said he planned to meet with Deputy Minister Pahad on March 29 to "load him with another piece of substance." According to Baruk, South Africa seeks to help Hamas transform from an armed struggle organization to a viable political party. Ambassador Baruch said he had heard that Hamas had asked to meet with the SAG defense establishment to learn how to transform a "jigsaw" of organizations into one security apparatus. He resented not hearing from the SAG earlier, stating that he thinks the SAG is implementing a "carefully calculated design with timing

and outcome" that in his view serves President Mbeki's political goal of "using the Middle East conflict to become a player on the world scene."

¶19. (C) Fluss subsequently told DepPolCouns on March 28 that they had received instructions from Tel Aviv to "ignore" the DFA query. They had considered and decided against recommending an Olmert-Mbeki phone call because it could have "no positive outcome". He had outlined Israeli concerns to DFA working levels following Charge's meeting with Baruch but had stressed that domestic politics would make it extremely difficult for any Israeli official to meet with the South Africans following the Kasrils trip.

IRAN

¶10. (C) Drawing parallels between SAG relations with Hamas and Iran, Marx said the SAG was making efforts to move Iran from its "intransigence" but affirmed support for the country's right to pursue peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The SAG's approach is for "talk, talk, talk not isolation." The CDA noted that Iran's rejection of reasonable EU-3 and Russian offers and single minded (and secret) pursuit of a full nuclear fuel cycle for a still non-existent reactor indicates that its interest is not peaceful nuclear energy. Marx looked uncomfortable and noted that Iran's nuclear program was not within his portfolio.

IRAQI DEBT

¶11. (C) In response to Ref B points, Marx said the SAG holds "significant" Iraqi debt primarily from military sales, dating back to when Iraq was "also on good terms with the U.S." That debt has not been recouped, but Marx said he did not know SAG intentions and promised to check. Per Marx, the DFA was not involved in the recent Iraqi parliamentary delegation's visit to South Africa and meeting with President Mbeki, which was organized by an NGO and UNDP. (Note: At a recent Muslim conference on the outskirts of Pretoria, a participant in the Mbeki meeting told PolCounselor that the Iraqis "got everything they wanted from President Mbeki.") Notwithstanding what the President promised, Marx did not expect to open a SAG Mission in Iraq because of the "security situation." Instead, he expected the SAG to focus first on opening more Embassies in Africa, its top priority.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) We do not subscribe to Ambassador Baruch's Machiavellian view of SAG intent regarding its involvement in the Middle East Peace Process. The SAG believes that its own experience of reconciliation and transition makes it a useful model and mediator in conflicts around the world. They argue that their willingness to engage Hamas is an extension of a much longer policy of engagement with both Israelis and Palestinians, to include the 2005 visits of Likud Parliamentarians and then-Deputy Prime Minister Olmert. We will continue to press the SAG on its engagement of Hamas, focusing on the fact that such engagement will likely harden Hamas attitudes and ultimately be counterproductive. If the SAG regional visit takes place (as seems likely), and Hamas makes no public concession toward Quartet principles (as seems likely), Hamas, intransigence might help convince the South Africans that the reciprocal Hamas visit should be "delayed" until such time as Hamas is ready to play a constructive role.

TEITELBAUM